THE PARADOX OF ISLAMIC REFORM: AN EXAMINATION OF THE SACRILEGE OF THE LEGACIES OF IBN TAYMIYYAH AND MUHAMMAD IBN ABD AL-WAHHĀB

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the significant legacies of two prolific Islamic scholars in the field of Islam, Ibn Taymiyyah and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhāb, and the sentiments and controversies surrounding their standpoints, values and initiatives. Known for their unyielding advocacy of monotheism (Tawḥīd), these scholars sought to purify Islamic practice from innovations they viewed as contrary to Islamic doctrine. Their direction shaped the Islamic tracts in their contemporary times and the decades to come. However, these Islamic theologians have famously come under scrutiny for their efforts in cleansing the concept of Tawḥīd from blemished perceptions which undermined its adherence in the Muslim masses. Conversely, it is evident under examination that their life struggles were marked by clear contradictions and complex paradox of their legacy. This exposition discusses the reforms they stood and struggled for and examines and reflects upon how the very practices they vehemently opposed were surprisingly evident in the actions of their followers and the criticism which stains their stances. Despite their efforts, posthumous actions by followers often contradicted their teachings. Through historical analysis, this paper examines the theological and social complexities in their reformist missions, particularly the irony surrounding practices following Ibn Taymiyyah's funeral and the intra-family opposition faced by Abd al-Wahhāb. The contradictory relationship between doctrine and practice has been the subject of extensive debate

within Islamic scholarship. By investigating these cases, the study aims to understand the cultural and psychological factors that shape religious adherence and the perpetuation of practices that conflict with strict doctrinal beliefs.

Keywords: *Islamic reform, Tawḥīd, doctrinal paradox, Islamic legacy, theologians.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ibn Taymiyyah and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhāb represent two pivotal figures in Islamic reform movements, both of whom dedicated their lives to purifying Islamic doctrine by emphasizing strict adherence to monotheism *(Tawḥīd)*. Although their times were eras apart, their mission was marked in their lives as strong endeavors to identify thoughts and practices which threatened the integrity of monotheism as the main tenet of Islam. Ibn Taymiyyah was an awe-inspiring scholar and Islamic *mujaddid* (reviver of religious tenets) with pivotal focus on *Tawḥīd* (the oneness of Allāh in belief and deeds). His

full name is Ahmad ibn Abdul Haleem ibn Abdus Salam ibn Taymiyyah. His life was marked by his unyielding commitment to *Tawḥīd* and his rejection of any practices he believed could lead to *shirk* (associating partners with Allāh). His teachings focused on eliminating innovations *(bid'ah)* and purifying Islamic practice, especially in opposition to the veneration of saints and the use of intermediaries in worship.

Similarly, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhāb, epochs later, sought to revive and enforce these principles, with a greater intensity which later led to him being called a hardliner and fundamentalist crusader. His campaign came to be decried and labelled as the *Wahhābi* movement. The factors which led to the establishment of the movement are evident till today and Abd al-Wahhāb's teachings are still prevalent in the Arabian Peninsula, though not without opposition from the south Asian sector.

Subsequently, our paper focuses on the tenets and teachings of these two theologians, their zeal and lasting impact. Despite their intentions, the events following their deaths reveal a complex legacy, marked by contradictions and controversies. Regardless of their efforts to eliminate practices such as saint veneration, shrine visitation, and the use of intermediaries in worship, the actions of their followers following their deaths often mirrored the very behaviors they sought to eradicate.

The legacy of both scholars continues to be debated, with their teachings forming the basis for significant movements within Islam, but also serving as a reminder of the complexities of implementing and maintaining strict theological doctrines in the face of human tradition and emotion.

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2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Taqi- ud- Din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328)

Ibn Taymiyyah was a prominent scholar, born in Turkey but spent most his life in Damascus during the Mamluk sultanate era, known for his strong stance on the doctrine of *Tawḥīd* (the oneness of Allāh) His views on *Tawḥīd* are central to his theological and legal thought, and he devoted much of his work to defending and clarifying this concept. He is revered for his literature and efforts to purify Islamic practices and bring them back to the pure doctrinal teachings of the *Qurʾān and Sunnah*, free from distortions and innovations led by undue human desires and ignorance. He continues to have a significant effect on Islamic thought through his extensive writings on theology, spirituality and law popular till today. We can access the crux from Ibn Taymiyyah's standpoint that a person is liable to fall into *shirk* only if the concept and connotations of *Tawḥīd* are not in his clear cognizance, this was recorded by Yasin N. in his translation of *Book of Iman* by Ibn Taymiyyah. Calvin (2018) points out that he considered saint veneration as *shirk* due to the exaggeration in the supremacy of saints; an acclaimed elevation of personalities which makes one assume them to be powerful enough to work independent of their Creator or be in special audience to their Lord as a benefactor to the pleadings of other mortals.

In his seminal work, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, Ibn Taymiyyah (trans. 2000) outlined the principles of monotheism and critiqued practices that he viewed as violations of *Tawḥīd*. One of his major works in theology is undoubtedly his book *Aqīdah Al Wāsiṭiyyah* which outlines Sunni orthodoxy dogma known as

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the *Salafiyyah* creed or goes by the phrase *Ahl as-Sunnah wal Jamāʾah*. Another of his books on spirituality which is also the focus of the treatise is *Al-Istighatha waʾl-Tawassul* in which Ibn Taymiyyah (trans. 2005) elementally criticized and outlined the harm of seeking the help of the saints and the dead as strictly detrimental to the stance of *Tawḥīd* and advocates direct supplication to Allāh. Ibn Taymiyyah (trans. 2000) in his book *Diseases of The Heart & Their Cures* points to the human desires and diseases of the heart which makes a person covet an adoration and disregard love and reliance on *Allāh*. Also refer to Michot's (2009) *Ibn Taymiyya's Views on Superstition.*

 Al-Dhahabī, a famous biographer and historian of the 13th century, provides a biographical account of Ibn Taymiyyah, including details of his death and the subsequent funeral in his book *Siyar Aʿlām al-Nubalāʾ*. Al-Dhahabī reflects on the impact of Ibn Taymiyyah 's death, acknowledging both the respect and controversy he generated. Al-Dhahabī emphasizes the significance of the funeral as a moment that brought together a wide spectrum of the Islamic scholarly community.

Ibn Rajab, a Hanbali scholar, discusses Ibn Taymiyyah 's death within the context of his contributions to the Hanbali school of thought in his work *Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābilah* where he discusses the sentiments of people after *Ibn Taymiyyah* death and the scholars who paid respects on his funeral. In *Al-Durar al-Kamina, Ibn Hajar al-Asqalānī* (trans.1994) discusses the reactions of various scholars to Ibn Taymiyyah's death. He notes that while some of his contemporaries were critical of his views, many still recognized his profound knowledge and dedication to Islamic scholarship, as evident by their participation in the funeral. His work is a biographical dictionary that includes reflections on Ibn

Taymiyyah 's life and legacy, particularly in the context of his funeral.

A contemporary academic work which reviews the importance Ibn Taymiyyah, his legacy and death and the lasting impressions in centuries throughout is contained in the edited version of Youssef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed about *Ibn Taymiyyah and His time*.

2.2 Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhāb *(1703-1792)*

Likewise, the most copious measure for the preservation of unadulterated Islamic teachings was led by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhāb. Qadhi (2003) gave an explanation of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb's *Kashf al-Shubuhāt*. The original book is a treatise by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhāb, where he argued against practices he considered *shirk* and defended his interpretations of *Tawḥīd*.

His teachings, which were greatly inspired by Ibn Taymiyyah, were characterized by a harsh rejection of anything that could be interpreted as *shirk*. His teachings critically came to be labelled '*The Wahhābi Movement'*. He, however, worked under the patronage of the Saudi ruling family, emphasizing strict interpretation of monotheism and carrying forward the mission of purifying Islamic practices with even greater rigor.

Abd al-Wahhāb's instructions were also uncompromising in their rejection of saint veneration, shrine visitation, and other practices he viewed as *shirk*. However, his rigid interpretation of *Tawḥīd* and the subsequent actions of his followers drew significant criticism, not just from contemporaries but also from within his own family. Abd al-Wahhāb's stance on *Tawḥīd* was

in strict monotheism like Ibn Taymiyyah whose views he vehemently supported. Like Ibn Taymiyyah, he emphasized the oneness of Allāh in His Lordship, exclusivity in worship and exclusivity of Allāh in His names and attributes. Abd al-Wahhāb's mission was to purify Islam from what he perceived as innovations *(bid'ah)* and corrupt practices that had crept into the religion over the centuries.

2.3 Literature Review on The Works of ibn Al -Wahhāb

The most celebrated book of Ibn Al -Wahhāb is *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd* (The Book of Monotheism) in which he outlines his understanding of *Tawḥīd* and provides evidence from the Qurʾān and Hadith to support his views. This book *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd* is a part of religious studies widely till now, where he distinctly categorized *Tawḥīd* in different connotations. He pointed out that Allāh's role is not only that of the Creator, but that of the Sustainer and Nourisher as well and the Only One worthy and powerful to be called upon, worshipped and praised. In his treatise *Kashf al-Shubuhāt* (Clarification of the Doubts), he systematically refutes common arguments used to justify practices which he considered to be *shirk*. We shed light on his conceptual work *Thalāthatu Usūl* (The Three Fundamental Principle). In this effort, Abd al-Wahhāb emphasizes the importance of understanding and implementing the three fundamental aspects of *Tawḥīd*. Abou el Fadl, K. (2014) notes that he paid exclusive attention to preserve *Tawḥīd* compulsively. His special efforts focused on creed of worship being exclusive to Allāh.

Comparably, there have been prolific discussions and opinions against several of his viewpoints like excommunication and

takfīr by their contemporaries. These deserve more study and analysis. A significant study are the standard opinions of Imam Shawkani as documented by Haykel, B. (2003). Ibn ʿAbd al-Rahman Abbud, S (nd.) *ʿAqidat al-shaykh Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-salafiya wa athruha fi al-ʿalam al-islami*, is worth reflection. A good reference is Ibn Ghannām (1994) Tarikh Najd, and also ʿAbd al-Rahmān ibn Hasan's (2003) famous commentary on Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb's book *Kitāb* Al-*Tawḥīd* called *Fath Al-Majid*. Marouf, Bashar Awwad (1996) *Siyar Aʿlām al-Nubalāʾ* [Biographies of Eminent Nobles] (in Arabic) (11th ed.). Beirut: Resalah Publishers.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative historical approach and employs an exploratory and interpretive framework to investigate the historical and theological paradoxes surrounding these two figures. It analyzes the contradictions between their teachings and the popular practices that followed their deaths. This academic enquiry reveals the persistence of sacrilegious and interpolative stances which still taint the Islamic beliefs and practices, despite centuries of theological corrections by prolific scholars, raises important questions about the intersection of religion, culture, and psychology. Why do these practices endure in Muslim societies, even when they are clearly at odds with the Islamic doctrine? What social, cultural, and emotional factors contribute to the continued reliance on symbols and superstitions? These questions are central to the current investigation, which seeks to understand the cultural and historical roots for undue reverence to created beings and material structures in Islam, and to analyze the theological implications of these inclinations and practices.

3.1 Data Collection

The data gathered in the study involved a thorough and comprehensive evaluation of historical documentation of literature and events. These particulars were gathered through documentary analysis of primary and secondary sources related to the life, death, and legacies of Ibn Taymiyyah and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhāb. Primary data was gathered through an extensive review of Islamic classical scholars and their views on these theologians' stances, efforts, approaches and texts. Thus, the paper draws on existing literature to understand the socio-cultural dynamics that gave rise to these legalities and paradoxes. The following key sources form the basis of the data collection.

3.1.1 Primary Sources

The study draws from historical texts authored by Ibn Taymiyyah and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhāb, including their major works such as *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, *Al-Istighatha wa'l-Tawassul*, and *Aqīdah Al-Wāsiṭiyyah*. These texts provide insight into the theological principles and arguments made by both scholars regarding the oneness of God (*Tawḥīd*) and the rejection of practices they considered *shirk* (associating partners with Allāh). Biographical accounts by prominent historians and scholars, such as Al-Dhahabī, Ibn Rajab, and Ibn Hajar al-Asqalānī, are used to gather details about the lives, deaths, and funerals of Ibn Taymiyyah and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhāb.   Their works, such as *Siyar Aʻlām al-Nubalāʾ* and *Al-Durar al-Kamina*, provide contemporary reflections on the paradoxes that emerged after their deaths, such as the veneration of Ibn

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Taymiyyah's remains and the criticisms of *Wahhabism* by contemporaries.

3.1.2 Secondary Sources

The research also relies on contemporary academic literature that examines the lasting impact of these scholars on Islamic thought, with a particular focus on the critiques and support they received from later scholars and movements. Works such as *Ibn Taymiyyah and His Times* (edited by Youssef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed) and Haykel's (2003) discussion of the *Wahhābi* movement are used to frame the broader socio-political and religious contexts of their legacies. Similarly, critiques and counter arguments presented by figures such as Sulayman ibn Abd al-Wahhāb (Muhammad's brother) are also analyzed. His treatise *Al-Ṣawā'iq*, which offers a strong rebuttal to Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhāb's ex-communication practices, is critical to understanding internal opposition to the *Wahhābi* movement.

3.2 Data Analysis

The investigation seeks to draw connections between the scholars' teachings on *Tawḥīd* and the paradoxes that emerged in the form of saint veneration and shrine visitation by their followers. Additionally, the research compares the criticisms they faced, especially in relation to their uncompromising stance on monotheism and excommunication practices. The research includes an examination of archival materials that document historical events, funeral practices, and the societal reactions following the deaths of these scholars. These archives provide context for the widespread attendance at their funerals

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and the rituals performed, which often contradicted their teachings.

4. DISCUSSION AND CRITICAL ACCLAIM

4.1 Ibn Taymiyyah 's Death and the Irony of His Funeral

Ibn Taymiyyah passed away on the 20th of Dhu al-Qa'dah 728 AH (September 26, 1328) while still imprisoned in the Citadel of Damascus. His death marked the end of a life spent in rigorous defense of *Tawḥīd* and the rejection of practices he considered innovations in Islam. Despite the criticisms, Ibn Taymiyyah was a well-recognized theologian, teacher and reformer. His death and the following events hold an irony of incredulity towards what he stood for.

Ibn Taymiyyah 's death was a significant event that attracted a massive turnout for his funeral. History records that over 60,000 people attended his funeral, including the elite and the common public comprising of scholars, students, and ordinary citizens The large attendance reflected the profound impact he had on his contemporaries. However, the actions of those attending his funeral seem to contradict the core of his teachings. Despite his opposition to saint veneration and grave worship, the events following his death leave a stark contradiction between his teachings and the actions of those who revered him.

4.2 Posthumous Veneration

Historical sources provide a comprehensive view of the circumstances surrounding *Ibn Taymiyyah 's* death, his burial, and the reflections on his life and work in the immediate

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aftermath of his passing. *Al-Durar al-Kamina* by Ibn Hajar al-Asqalānī also offers credible reflection.

We mention the account of al-Birzālī (d.1339), narrated by Ibn Kathīr *(d.1373)* which indicate that many of his followers treated his remains with the same reverence he had spent his life condemning. It was a glaring spectacle that thousands started visiting his grave. Many mourners engaged in practices that bordered on the veneration of *Ibn Taymiyyah himself*, an action which he fought against. Some reportedly drank the water used to wash his body, while others paid large sums of money for items associated with him, such as his skull cap and the cord he used to wear around his neck. Furthermore, many visited his grave in what could be seen as acts of veneration, the very practice he sought to eliminate. Despite his life-long opposition to the excessive regard and eulogizing of the dead, the actions of those who attended his funeral revealed a stark contradiction to his teachings. This contradiction highlights the complex relationship between doctrine and popular religious practice, even among those who were presumably committed to his teachings.

It is also to be noted that Ibn Taymiyyah was buried in a *Ṣūfī* cemetery in Damascus. This choice of burial site, the subsequent glorification of his grave, alongside the actions of his followers, gave rise to speculations as to what extent he was recognized from the *Ṣūfī* stream; or the question that were his teachings and the principles he outlined and fought for understood, availed or remembered. While Ibn Taymiyyah did not reject Sufism entirely, he was critical of certain Ṣūfī practices, which were interpolated later, that he viewed as deviations from pure monotheism. He condemned practices

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such as invoking the names of saints for help and the use of certain rituals that he believed were innovations in religion. The question arises that whether the ideal and mission for which he suffered persecution and imprisonment was truly understood or not?

However, there is another odyssey that, this great sheikh of orthodox Islam who had such a celebrated life and death, his grave site is not a well renowned place in Damascus in contemporary times. Michot (2009) documents this scenario in his stark work '*Reflections on the funeral, and the present state of the tomb, of Ibn Taymiyyah.* (Translated from French by Qureshi, for *a grave in Damascus...)* is worth reading.

4.3 Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhāb and The Critics

Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhāb's stance on *Tawḥīd* was marked by an uncompromising commitment to strict monotheism and a rejection of any practices that he believed could lead to *shirk*. His teachings sought to reform and purify Islamic practices by returning to what he saw as the original principles of Islam, free from innovations and corrupt practices. Abd al-Wahhāb criticized a variety of popular spiritual practices that he understood as sacrilegious to the Oneness of Allāh. These included taking vows to anybody other than Allāh or beseeching to saints or prophets as intermediaries.   In short, any authority to created beings that should be attributed only to Allāh**.**

Abd al-Wahhāb's teachings on *Tawḥīd* extended beyond theory, taking concrete form through his alliance with the Saudi ruling family. This partnership facilitated the spread of his strict monotheistic doctrine throughout the Arabian Peninsula,

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resulting in the eradication of many shrines and the enforcement of rigid *Tawḥīd*-centered laws. In a significant display of commitment, Abd al-Wahhāb sanctioned the destruction of ancient monuments, including revered burial sites, such as that of Zayd, Umar Ibn al-Khattab's brother, as well as graves of key Islamic figures like Khadijah and Maimuna.

By the early 19th century, Abd al-Wahhāb's doctrines had inspired a wave of iconoclasm targeting shrines across the Hejaz, Yemen, Hadhramaut, and Iraq, where even the tomb of Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Hussain, was not spared. However, the Prophet's (ﷺ) Mosque in Medina remained untouched. These acts were partly rooted in the earlier reforms of Ibn Taymiyyah, who also opposed practices reminiscent of pre-Islamic paganism. In the 18th century Najd, practices involving intercession with revered figures, trees, and stones highlighted lingering elements of idolatry, sparking movements to purify Islamic practice. For further historical context on the Najd region's developments, see Abd Allāh ibn Bishr's *'Unwan al-Majd fi Tarikh Najd* and Brockelmann's *History of the Arabic Written Tradition*.

Historical records, such as those by Levtzion and Syracuse (1987), indicate similar reformist zeal in Egypt, where Turkish adherents influenced by Ibn Taymiyyah 's doctrines dismantled Ṣūfī sites and tombs, prompting civil unrest. This iconoclastic fervor is echoed in the 2001 Taliban-led destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, perceived as promoting idolatry. For comparative perspectives, see Jamal Elias (2007) on the Bamiyan statues, and Calvin's (2018) *Treatise on Relics*, where arguments parallel those of Ibn Taymiyyah in critiquing relic veneration.

4.4 Criticism from His Brother

One of the most prominent opponents of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhāb was his own brother, Sulayman ibn Abd al-Wahhāb. In his treatise "*Al-Ṣawā'iq*", Sulayman (2010) criticized his brother's hardline beliefs and harsh judgments. He also condemned the proclamation of *takfīr* (declaring someone a non-believer) meted on people by his brother on other people. He challenged this as too harsh although contending that the practices of beseeching saints and other practices are reprehensible but does not render any person to be out of the fold of Islam. Zayd al-Rūmī, (1398H) has recorded on his behalf, 'We do not *takfīr* Muslims. We only *takfīr mushrikūn'*.

Sulayman questioned the validity of declaring centuries-old practices as grounds for excommunication from the faith and the number of people involved in this to be declared *kafirs* (those who reject Islam/non-Muslims).   He pointed out that while Ibn Taymiyyah condemned certain practices as innovations or errors, he did not go as far as declaring those who practiced them as outside the fold of Islam. It is on records that *Ibn Taymiyyah* has stated in *Al-Istighātha* that it is only Allāh's right to declare a person as unbeliever for reasons other than stated by *Allāh* or outlined by Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ).

5. CONCLUSION

The deaths and funerals of both Ibn Taymiyyah and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhāb, as well as the criticisms they faced, reveal the complexities and contradictions inherent in their reformist missions. Despite their efforts to purify Islamic practice and eliminate what they viewed as deviations from *Tawḥīd*, the reactions of their followers and the practices surrounding their

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deaths suggest a deep-rooted tension between theological ideals and popular religious practices.

Ibn Taymiyyah fought against a form of reverence accorded to men raised to a saintly degree. These beliefs and their manifestations were the direct target of opposition by the two referred scholars in our treatise. However, the events that followed his death were in contradiction Ibn Taymiyyah 's lifelong battle against similar practices. This state also highlights the complex relationship between doctrine and popular religious practice, even among those who were presumably committed to his teachings.

Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhāb carried forward the mission of purifying Islamic practices with even greater rigor, leading to what became known as *Wahhabism*. His teachings were greatly uncompromising in their rejection of saint veneration, shrine visitation, and other practices he viewed as *shirk*. However, it was observed on record that his rigid interpretation of *Tawḥīd* and the subsequent actions of his followers drew significant criticism, not just from contemporaries but also from within his own family. It was claimed that vastness of mercy and tolerance in the Islamic frame accommodates various opinions and diverseness of thought.

The hierarchy of the conflict against venerations was observed in Ibn Taymiyyah's measures extending to Ibn Abdul-Wahhāb and his strict dealings, instigating other similar thoughts and campaigns against practices alleged to impend the dependence on *Tawḥīd*, curbing the promotion of superstitions, the risings of cult and the occult. Their views were embraced by the stream labelled *Ṣalafīs*, conforming the stance to be in line

with the fundamental Islamic doctrine of monotheism, and just not one of legal deduction and judgement (*fiqh*) of the Islamic position and view.

Despite their sincere efforts to purify Islam from being tainted by wrong inclinations and elements, they faced persecution and criticism. Their strong stances led them into condemnations and repudiations, due the unyielding mystical influences Muslims were caught into. The legacy of both scholars continues to be debated, with their teachings forming the basis for significant movements within Islam, but also serving as a reminder of the complexities of implementing and maintaining strict theological doctrines in the face of human tradition and emotion.

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